

PROVIDER ARTICLE

It Takes a Community...and an Engaged Patient

Americans are living longer and healthier lives. But for rural Americans, especially African-Americans, life expectancy is shorter, multiple chronic conditions (illnesses and disabilities) are common, and quality of life falls short of expectations. Often, access to good quality medical care is limited and health care costs, including medications, too great for the average person. Low income, social disparities (differences between rural and urban people) and limited knowledge of medical treatments add to the burdens of rural older adults. Sometimes lost in conversations with health providers is what the patients--the persons, after all, who are trying to be healthy--value as most important to them. By coming together, patients, families, health care providers and hospital systems, faith leaders, patient advocates and local governments can create "Healthy Communities, Healthy People". It takes a community to overcome the obstacles facing rural African-Americans, but it also takes an "engaged" patient to make healthy lifestyle decisions and learn how to work with health care providers. And it takes family members and trusted friends to make it possible for the older adult to achieve a good life. Together we can learn about the importance of good nutrition, physical activity, health screenings, primary medical care and community-based services that help adults of this community to achieve their medical goals and avoid becoming victims of those chronic conditions that limit life expectancy and disable people, well before their time. The first step is to hear from older adults of this community and their families: what is most important to them in order to become and stay healthy? The second step is for the community to identify opportunities to meet the needs of older adults and their families. Finally, when we engage patients and activate them to take charge of their health, and when communities come to value the health of its citizens, then not only will we see healthier older adults, we will see healthier and more desirable neighborhoods, a better economy, and new medical care providers. Not a dream, but a reality.